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Bodies in the Wilderness: Eco-poetics, Materiality, and the Politics of Body in William Blake's *Songs of Experience* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract:

This paper offers a comparative exploration of eco-poetics, materiality, and the politics of embodiment in William Blake's Songs of Experience and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing. It argues that both texts engage the wilderness not merely as a geographic locale, but as a contested and generative space where language, power, and the body intersect. Blake, writing at the dawn of industrial modernity, embeds ecological and political critique within the symbolic landscapes of his illuminated poems. His visions expose the commodification of both nature and the human spirit under institutional forces—religious, economic, and imperial. Through the material form of his art—engraved, colored, and composed by hand—Blake insists on the inseparability of poetic meaning and physical medium, invoking an eco-poetics rooted in resistance and spiritual reawakening. In contrast, Atwood's *Surfacing* navigates a twentieth-century wilderness haunted by colonial violence and patriarchal inscription. Her protagonist's psychological unraveling and bodily regression in the Canadian landscape foregrounds a feminist and postcolonial eco-poetics that resists the disembodied logic of Western rationality. The wilderness becomes a site for unlearning language, shedding cultural artifice, and encountering the ecological self through sensory, pre-linguistic experience. Both texts ultimately stage the body as a locus of epistemological rupture and ecological insight. By examining these works through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates literary theory, eco-criticism, and materialist critique, the paper reveals how Blake and Atwood re-imagine the wilderness as a space of poetic insurgency, where the body and the text become instruments of ecological resistance and political transformation.

Keywords: Eco poetics, Materiality, Embodiment, Politics of Body, Wilderness, Literary Resistance.

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Introduction

In the face of mounting ecological crises, climate-induced dislocations, and the erosion of sociopolitical coherence, literature increasingly operates as a critical site where the interdependence of nature, language, and embodiment can be exposed, rethought, and reimagined. No longer merely a backdrop for human drama, the wilderness in literature has emerged as an active, agential space—simultaneously a site of rupture and renewal. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of William Blake's *Songs of Experience* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, arguing that both authors foreground the wilderness as a space that unsettles dominant narratives of modernity, knowledge, and subjectivity. Despite the distance in their historical and cultural contexts, Blake and Atwood converge in their use of ecopoetic strategies that integrate materiality, bodily perception, and textual form to resist hegemonic systems of meaning-making. Blake, writing during the onset of industrial capitalism and Enlightenment rationalism, disrupts mechanized worldviews through his illuminated poetry, which emphasizes handmade artistry and spiritual insurgency. His poetic visions reconfigure the wilderness as a symbolic terrain of ecological and ethical resistance. In contrast, Atwood's 20th-century feminist and postcolonial reworking of wilderness in *Surfacing* centers the female body and its sensory relationship to the land as a method of decolonizing both identity and knowledge. Through her protagonist's descent into a state of pre-linguistic awareness, Atwood critiques the alienation imposed by patriarchal and colonial logics and offers a model of ecological subjectivity grounded in the material and affective experience of the body.

This paper situates these literary interventions within contemporary ecocritical and materialist discourse. Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of "slow violence" underscores how ecological degradation is often invisible and temporally deferred, affecting marginalized bodies disproportionately. Sylvia Wynter's (2003) critique of the colonial construction of the human complicates the anthropocentric biases embedded in both literary and scientific epistemologies. Furthermore, Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of "vibrant matter" and Karen Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism provide crucial frameworks for understanding how Blake's and Atwood's works destabilize the boundary between human and nonhuman agency.
By exploring how poetic form, embodied knowledge, and ecological entanglement intersect in these texts, the paper reveals how literature can serve as a vehicle for reimagining resistance and relationality in an ecologically fraught world.

Ecopoetics and the Language of Nature

Ecopoetics, as an emerging field of literary and environmental inquiry, interrogates not only the representation of nature in poetry but also the deeper entanglements between language, embodiment, and ecological consciousness. Moving beyond traditional nature writing, ecopoetics challenges the anthropocentric and logocentric frameworks that have historically mediated human interactions with the more-than-human world (Bate, 2000; Morton, 2007). It asks critical questions about how poetic language can either obscure or illuminate ecological relationships and posits literature as a space where the destabilization of linguistic norms might open pathways toward ecological awareness and ethical reorientation. In *Songs of Experience*, William Blake crafts a symbolic ecology that resists the rationalist, mechanistic, and commodified vision of nature emerging during the industrial revolution. His poem "The Tyger" exemplifies a dialectical engagement with the sublime, wherein nature is not domesticated or pastoralized but rendered as a source of awe, terror, and metaphysical uncertainty. The famous query— "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (Blake, 1794/2008, p. 24) is not merely rhetorical; it dislodges binary thinking by juxtaposing innocence with ferocity, suggesting that

divine or cosmic creation contains within its irreducible contradictions. As Morton (2007) argues, Blake's poetry is a site where nature is encountered not as an object of observation but as a force that disrupts epistemological certainty. This disruption is amplified by the material form of Blake's work: his illuminated printing resists the homogenization of print culture, thereby insisting on the materiality of poetic production as an ecopoetic act in itself (Essick, 1989). Conversely, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) situates language as a vehicle of alienation and colonization, particularly in the context of gendered and colonial subjectivity. The narrator's retreat into the Canadian wilderness initiates a process of deconstruction—not only of personal identity but also of linguistic authority. She remarks, "The words are wrong… they don't fit the things I'm trying to say" (Atwood, 1972, p. 140), indicating a fundamental rupture between inherited language systems and embodied ecological truth. This breakdown aligns with Alaimo's (2010) theory of trans-corporeality, which emphasizes the permeability of bodily boundaries and the intermeshing of human and nonhuman materialities. In *Surfacing*, the shedding of linguistic structures parallels the shedding of cultural conditioning, enabling a more visceral, sensory atonement to the ecological world. Together, Blake and Atwood reveal that the wilderness—whether symbolic or literal—is not simply a setting but a transformative agent that destabilizes conventional modes of meaning-making. By engaging with the limits and failures of language, both authors challenge readers to reconsider how poetic form might facilitate new modes of relationality with the environment. In this sense, ecopoetics is not merely an aesthetic approach but an ethical and ontological intervention. It calls for a radical revision of how we perceive, articulate, and embody our place within an interconnected and imperilled planet.

Materiality and Embodied Resistance of Text and Body

Materiality in literature extends beyond the physical attributes of the text to encompass the embodied dimensions of narrative and the ways in which form and content conspire to challenge hegemonic structures. Both William Blake and Margaret Atwood utilize materiality not as an aesthetic flourish but as a medium for radical resistance. Their works suggest that language, when situated in and through the body and the crafted artifact, becomes a site of political, ecological, and epistemological intervention. Blake's illuminated books are emblematic of his resistance to the mechanization and standardization associated with the rise of industrial capitalism and Enlightenment rationality. Rather than conforming to the emergent norms of print culture, Blake chose a labor-intensive method of relief etching and hand-coloring, a practice which Robert Essick (1989) interprets as an intentional subversion of capitalist reproduction. Each edition of *Songs of Experience* becomes a unique artifact, asserting the singularity of imaginative labor against the commodified uniformity of print. This tactile, handcrafted form mirrors the thematic concerns of the poetry itself, where Blake critiques the physical and psychological constraints imposed by modern institutions. In "London," Blake's use of the phrase "mind-forg'd manacles" (Blake, 1794/2008, p. 32) speaks to the internalization of external power. The city becomes a space where bodies are inscribed by systemic control, and the mind, rather than being a site of liberation, is molded by ideology. As Judith Butler (1993) argues, the body is not a passive entity but one that is constructed and constrained by discursive forces. Blake's poetry thus dramatizes the co-constitution of form and flesh, art and experience.

Atwood's *Surfacing* similarly foregrounds the body as a terrain of resistance. The unnamed narrator's return to the Canadian wilderness is not merely geographic but ontological, initiating a process of bodily re-engagement that challenges colonial, patriarchal, and linguistic impositions. Her experiences—hunger, menstruation, physical immersion in the lake—disrupt the Cartesian mind-body split and foreground what Stacy Alaimo (2010) terms "trans-corporeality": the understanding of the body as materially enmeshed within environmental systems.

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A particularly evocative moment in the novel occurs when the narrator states, "I lean against the tree, I press my face into the bark… I feel the tree breathing" (Atwood, 1972, p. 181). This sensorial fusion between human and nonhuman mirrors Karen Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism, where the boundaries between subject and object dissolve, and meaning is produced through intra-action. The narrator's rejection of spoken language in favor of tactile, embodied perception exemplifies a feminist and ecopoetic reclamation of agency, one rooted not in abstraction but in material interrelation. Together, Blake and Atwood demonstrate how literary form and embodied narrative converge to critique structures of domination and to envision alternative modes of being. Their use of materiality—both in text and in body—challenges the presumed neutrality of language and reclaims it as a tool of resistance, rooted in the tangible, affective, and ecological realities of lived experience.

Politics of the Body and Literary Resistance

In literature, the human body is rarely a neutral entity; it is often the battleground upon which power, ideology, and identity converge. Both William Blake and Margaret Atwood, in their respective texts *Songs of Experience* and *Surfacing*, foreground the body as a critical site of political contestation and subversive potential. Their works reveal how bodies—especially those marked by age, gender, and class—are constructed, disciplined, and yet remain capable of resistance. Blake's depiction of children in *Songs of Experience* serves as a scathing indictment of institutional cruelty and moral hypocrisy. In "The Chimney Sweeper," the child's lament, "They clothed me in the clothes of death / And taught me to sing the notes of woe" (Blake, 1794/2008, p. 35), conveys how systems of religion and labor conspire to normalize suffering. The child's physical vulnerability becomes a metaphor for the spiritual and psychological degradation enforced by Church and State. Hilton (1988) interprets Blake's use of the child figure as prophetic: a symbol of innocence corrupted yet capable of revealing ethical truths that dominant institutions obscure. Judith Butler's (1993) theory of performative embodiment is especially useful in extending this reading. According to Butler, the body is not merely a biological entity but is produced and regulated through discursive practices. Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" (1794/2008, p. 32) thus become not only symbolic of mental constraint but also of the bodily compliance demanded by oppressive systems. His poetic strategy exposes these constraints while simultaneously invoking the imaginative capacity to transcend them.

In Atwood's *Surfacing*, the female body is central to a narrative of colonization and resistance. The protagonist, alienated from her own body through layers of patriarchal and colonial inscription, undergoes a process of re-embodiment through her immersion in the natural world. Her declaration, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (Atwood, 1972, p. 192), signals a conscious disavowal of imposed subject positions. The rejection of victimhood is not a denial of harm but an assertion of agency and autonomy. This transformation is underpinned by feminist theoretical frameworks. Cixous's (1976) call for a woman to "write through her body" finds resonance in the narrator's shift away from language toward a sensorial mode of authorship. Likewise, Bouson (1993) argues that Atwood enacts a feminist poetics where the body becomes the locus of recovery and resistance, disrupting patriarchal codes of silence and control. The narrator's eventual retreat into silence does not signify erasure but rather a refusal to participate in discursive regimes that have historically objectified her. It becomes, paradoxically, a form of authorship grounded not in verbal articulation but in material, ecological presence. Together, Blake and Atwood demonstrate that the body—when reclaimed from structures of domination—can serve as a potent vehicle for political critique and poetic resistance. Through child labourers and decolonized women, they reveal that embodiment is not merely a condition of subjection but also of subversion, creativity, and ecological reawakening.

Nature as Mirror: Eco-poetic Reflections of Human Psyche

In the works of William Blake and Margaret Atwood, nature functions not merely as setting or symbol, but as a psychological mirror—reflecting, refracting, and reshaping the internal landscapes of human consciousness. Their eco-poetic visions use wilderness as a means of excavating the psychic consequences of alienation, domination, and repression. Both authors demonstrate how external environments—whether urban blight or forested silence—serve as indices of mental and emotional disruption as well as sites for potential healing and transformation. Blake's poems in *Songs of Experience* operate as critiques of the psychic toll of modernity. In "The Tyger," the speaker's repeated question, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (Blake, 1794/2008, p. 24), captures an existential dissonance. The tiger's "fearful symmetry" is not just a reference to the sublime natural world but an emblem of human ambivalence, creativity, and destruction. Frye (1990) contends that Blake's mythic animals are psychological projections rather than zoological observations, foregrounding the imaginative dialectic between fear and fascination. This psychic tension is further underscored in "London," where the speaker encounters "marks of weakness, marks of woe" in every face (Blake, 1794/2008, p. 32). Here, Blake connects urban degradation to interior despair, suggesting that oppressive socio-political structures manifest themselves in the very bodies and minds of the people. Damrosch (2015) asserts that Blake's poetic landscapes dramatize a split self, fractured by the disenchanted and mechanized worldview of the Enlightenment. The disconnection between human and nature, mind and body, is inscribed in these visions of urban decay and spiritual impoverishment. Yet, even within this bleakness, Blake's symbolic wilderness offers glimpses of imaginative resistance- a way of envisioning inner wholeness through ecological awareness and spiritual reintegration.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* presents a parallel but gendered and postcolonial experience of psychic alienation and renewal through the natural world. The Canadian wilderness, particularly the lake and forest, becomes a space of confrontation with suppressed memory, colonial trauma, and patriarchal conditioning. "I'd been in love with the lake without knowing it" (Atwood, 1972, p. 14) reveals the protagonist's buried affinity with the nonhuman, a connection obscured by the epistemologies of civilization. Feminist scholars have interpreted the novel as a journey of unlearning. Howells (2006) describes the protagonist's descent as a deconstructive process, while Riegel (1996) reads it as a narrative of postcolonial recovery. The protagonist's ecological rebirth entails a shedding of linguistic, cultural, and gendered scripts, culminating in a state of embodied unity with her environment. This reclamation of the self through nature echoes María Lugones' (2007) rejection of the colonial/modern gender system, which artificially dichotomizes subject and object, human and nature. Thus, for both Blake and Atwood, nature operates as a mirror of the fragmented psyche but also as a means to transcend that fragmentation. Through ecopoetic strategies, they expose the psychological costs of disconnection from the natural world and imagine alternative subjectivities grounded in ecological entanglement and emotional truth.

Conclusion: Reimagining Wilderness, Reclaiming the Body

William Blake's *Songs of Experience* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* fundamentally challenge prevailing conceptions of wilderness by reconfiguring it from an idealized, untouched space to a dynamic site where identity, knowledge, and power are contested and renegotiated. Rather than presenting wilderness as a passive backdrop, both texts foreground it as an active terrain of struggle where the body emerges as a critical locus of resistance against dominant epistemologies. Blake's handmade, tactile artistic practice resists the homogenizing abstraction of industrial modernity, while Atwood's visceral, corporeal prose destabilizes patriarchal reductions of the female body to mere symbol or object. These literary works

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intervene in the Cartesian and Enlightenment traditions that have historically privileged disembodied rationalism and dualistic separations between mind and body, nature and culture, subject and object. Instead, they assert that authentic resistance must begin with the body understood not simply as metaphorical, but as materially situated and sensate, embodied in complex relations with the environment. Engaging with contemporary theoretical frameworks enhances the critical import of these texts. Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" illuminates how ecological destruction is intimately tied to histories of colonialism and dispossession, highlighting the necessity of embodied witness and activism in reimagining environmental justice. Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism disrupts fixed binaries by positing matter and meaning as co-constitutive, emphasizing how bodies and wilderness are entangled in intra-actions that defy traditional separations. Sylvia Wynter (2003) critiques the colonial humanist legacy that marginalizes non-Western and non-rational ways of knowing, calling for new narratives that recognize multiplicity and hybridity in human and nonhuman relations. Jane Bennett's (2010) vibrant materialism further insists on the agency of nonhuman matter, complicating the passive role often assigned to wilderness and bodies alike. Val Plumwood's (1993) ecofeminist analysis of dualisms exposes the patriarchal and anthropocentric logics that underpin ecological degradation and bodily subjugation, thereby affirming the necessity of embodied and ecological resistance.

Through this interdisciplinary lens, Blake's and Atwood's texts can be understood not only as literary artifacts but as poetic interventions that engage with and expand ecological and political discourse. Language itself, wielded by both authors, ceases to function as a transparent conduit for knowledge; instead, it becomes a contested arena in which power, identity, and resistance are performed and negotiated. Their poetic and prose styles resist instrumental rationality and hierarchical epistemologies, offering instead an ethical orientation grounded in embodiment, relationality, and materiality. Ultimately, *Songs of Experience* and *Surfacing* point toward the urgent need for a more entangled, ethical engagement with the world—one that recognizes the inseparability of body and environment, subjectivity and ecology. By reclaiming the body as a site of sensate, material resistance, these works destabilize enduring dualisms and invite readers to envision futures premised on interconnectedness rather than separation. In this way, Blake and Atwood's interventions resonate with contemporary ecological crises and feminist political struggles, offering vital resources for rethinking how we inhabit and resist within the wilderness of the Anthropocene.

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Bio-Note

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